

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF DELAWARE

JOSHUA D. MCGRIFF,)	
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	
v.)	C.A. No. 21-996 (MN)
)	
DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF)	
CORRECTION, et al.,)	
)	
Defendants.)	

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Joshua D. McGriff, James T. Vaughn Correctional Center, Smyrna, Delaware, Pro Se Plaintiff.

November 22, 2021
Wilmington, Delaware


NOREIKA, U.S. District Judge:

Plaintiff Joshua D. McGriff (“Plaintiff”), a pretrial detainee at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center Institution filed this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. (D.I. 1). He appears *pro se* and has been granted leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (D.I. 3). This Court proceeds to screen the Complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b) and § 1915A(a).

I. BACKGROUND

The case proceeds on paragraphs 17 through 22 and 24 of the Complaint against Defendants Delaware Department of Correction (“DOC”), Howard R. Young Correctional Institution (“HRYCI”), and C/O Bucknor (“Bucknor”). (*See* D.I. 4). Plaintiff, who has been diagnosed with mental health issues, alleges that on October 26, 2020 and while housed at HRYCI, he asked to see mental health. (D.I. 1 at 7). One correctional officer became irate and used offensive language and Bucknor came onto the dayroom floor and maced and assaulted Plaintiff. (*Id.* at 8). Plaintiff was taken to segregated housing and disciplined. (*Id.*).

Plaintiff seeks compensatory and punitive damages. (*Id.* at 10).

II. LEGAL STANDARDS

A federal court may properly dismiss an action *sua sponte* under the screening provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b) if “the action is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.” *Ball v. Famiglio*, 726 F.3d 448, 452 (3d Cir. 2013); *see also* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) (*in forma pauperis* actions); 28 U.S.C. § 1915A (actions in which prisoner seeks redress from a governmental defendant); 42 U.S.C. § 1997e (prisoner actions brought with respect to prison conditions). The Court must accept all factual allegations in a complaint as true and take them in the light most favorable to a *pro se* plaintiff. *See Phillips v. County of Allegheny*, 515 F.3d

224, 229 (3d Cir. 2008); *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 93 (2007). Because Plaintiff proceeds *pro se*, his pleading is liberally construed and his Complaint, “however inartfully pleaded, must be held to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers.” *Erickson*, 551 U.S. at 94 (citations omitted).

A complaint is not automatically frivolous because it fails to state a claim. *See Dooley v. Wetzel*, 957 F.3d 366, 374 (3d Cir. 2020) (quoting *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 331 (1989)); *see also Grayson v. Mayview State Hosp.*, 293 F.3d 103, 112 (3d Cir. 2002). “Rather, a claim is frivolous only where it depends ‘on an “indisputably meritless legal theory” or a “clearly baseless” or “fantastic or delusional” factual scenario.’” *Dooley v. Wetzel*, 957 F.3d at 374 (quoting *Mitchell v. Horn*, 318 F.3d 523, 530 (2003) and *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327-28).

The legal standard for dismissing a complaint for failure to state a claim pursuant to § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and § 1915A(b)(1) is identical to the legal standard used when deciding Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) motions. *See Tourscher v. McCullough*, 184 F.3d 236, 240 (3d Cir. 1999) (applying Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6) standard to dismissal for failure to state a claim under § 1915(e)(2)(B)). However, before dismissing a complaint or claims for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted pursuant to the screening provisions of 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915 and 1915A, this Court must grant Plaintiff leave to amend his complaint unless amendment would be inequitable or futile. *See Grayson v. Mayview State Hosp.*, 293 F.3d at 114.

A complaint may be dismissed only if, accepting the well-pleaded allegations in the complaint as true and viewing them in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, a court concludes that those allegations “could not raise a claim of entitlement to relief.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 558 (2007). Though “detailed factual allegations” are not required, a complaint must do more than simply provide “labels and conclusions” or “a formulaic recitation of the

elements of a cause of action.” *Davis v. Abington Mem’l Hosp.*, 765 F.3d 236, 241 (3d Cir. 2014) (internal quotation marks omitted). In addition, a complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face. *See Williams v. BASF Catalysts LLC*, 765 F.3d 306, 315 (3d Cir. 2014) (citing *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) and *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570). Finally, a plaintiff must plead facts sufficient to show that a claim has substantive plausibility. *See Johnson v. City of Shelby*, 574 U.S. 10 (2014). A complaint may not be dismissed for imperfect statements of the legal theory supporting the claim asserted. *See id.* at 10.

Under the pleading regime established by *Twombly* and *Iqbal*, a court reviewing the sufficiency of a complaint must take three steps: (1) take note of the elements the plaintiff must plead to state a claim; (2) identify allegations that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth; and (3) when there are well-pleaded factual allegations, assume their veracity and determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief. *See Connelly v. Lane Const. Corp.*, 809 F.3d 780, 787 (3d Cir. 2016); *see also Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (citing Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)). Deciding whether a claim is plausible will be a “context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.” *Id.*

III. DISCUSSION

A. Eleventh Amendment

The DOC and HYRCI are immune from suit. HRYCI is part of the DOC. *See* 11 Del. C. § 6501 *et seq.* As an agency of the State of Delaware, the DOC and institutions under its umbrella are immune from suit. *See Jones v. Sussex Correctional Institute*, 725 F. App’x 157, 159 (3d Cir. 2017). The Eleventh Amendment protects states and their agencies and departments from suit in

federal court regardless of the kind of relief sought. *Pennhurst State School & Hosp. v. Halderman*, 465 U.S. 89, 100 (1984). “Absent a state’s consent, the Eleventh Amendment bars a civil rights suit in federal court that names the state as a defendant.” *Laskaris v. Thornburgh*, 661 F.2d 23, 25 (3d Cir. 1981) (citing *Alabama v. Pugh*, 438 U.S. 781 (1978)). Delaware has not waived its immunity from suit in federal court; although Congress can abrogate a state’s sovereign immunity, it did not do so through the enactment of 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *See Jones*, 725 F. App’x at 159-160; *Brooks-McCollum v. Delaware*, 213 F. App’x 92, 94 (3d Cir. 2007). In addition, dismissal is proper because the DOC and HRYCI are not persons for purposes of § 1983. *See Will v. Michigan Dep’t of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 71(1989); *Calhoun v. Young*, 288 F. App’x 47 (3d Cir. 2008).

Accordingly, the DOC and HYRCI will be dismissed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(iii) and § 1915A(b)(2) based upon immunity from suit.

Plaintiff has alleged what appears to be a cognizable and non-frivolous excessive force claim against Bucknor. He may proceed with the excessive force claim.

B. Request for Counsel

Plaintiff requests counsel on the grounds that he is unable to afford counsel, the issues are complex, he has limited law library access, he has unsuccessfully sought retained counsel, and he has limited knowledge of the law. (D.I. 6). A *pro se* litigant proceeding *in forma pauperis* has no constitutional or statutory right to representation by counsel.¹ *See Brightwell v. Lehman*, 637 F.3d 187, 192 (3d Cir. 2011); *Tabron v. Grace*, 6 F.3d 147, 153 (3d Cir. 1993). Representation by

¹ *See Mallard v. United States Dist. Court for the S. Dist. of Iowa*, 490 U.S. 296 (1989) (§ 1915(d) (now § 1915(e)(1)) does not authorize a federal court to require an unwilling attorney to represent an indigent civil litigant, the operative word in the statute being “request.”).

counsel, however, may be appropriate under certain circumstances, after a finding that a plaintiff's claim has arguable merit in fact and law. *Tabron*, 6 F.3d at 155.

After passing this threshold inquiry, the Court should consider a number of factors when assessing a request for counsel. Factors to be considered by a court in deciding whether to request a lawyer to represent an indigent plaintiff include: (1) the merits of the plaintiff's claim; (2) the plaintiff's ability to present his or her case considering his or her education, literacy, experience, and the restraints placed upon him or her by incarceration; (3) the complexity of the legal issues; (4) the degree to which factual investigation is required and the plaintiff's ability to pursue such investigation; (5) the plaintiff's capacity to retain counsel on his or her own behalf; and (6) the degree to which the case turns on credibility determinations or expert testimony. *See Montgomery v. Pinchak*, 294 F.3d 492, 498-99 (3d Cir. 2002); *Tabron*, 6 F.3d at 155-56. The list is not exhaustive, nor is any one factor determinative. *Tabron*, 6 F.3d at 157.

Assuming, solely for the purpose of deciding this motion, that Plaintiff's claims have merit in fact and law, several of the *Tabron* factors militate against granting his request for counsel. To date, the filings demonstrate Plaintiff's ability to articulate his claims and represent himself. In addition, the one remaining issue is not complex. Moreover, this case is in its early stages and service has not yet taken place. For these reasons, this Court will deny Plaintiff's request for counsel without prejudice to renew.

IV. CONCLUSION

For the above reasons, the Court will (1) deny Plaintiff's request for counsel without prejudice to renew (D.I. 6); (2) dismiss all claims against the DOC and HYRCI based upon their immunity from suit pursuant 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(iii) and 1915A(b)(2); and (3) allow Plaintiff to proceed against Bucknor on the excessive force claim.

An appropriate Order will be entered.